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Bush remains loyal to the Company

By Martin Schram

George Herbert Walker Bush is, above all else, a Company man.

In the mid-'70s, he won high marks from the Company professionals at the Langley, Va., home office for being a CIA director who stood firm when critics attacked.

G.H.W. Bush pays off in loyalty to those who loyally serve. And that goes a long way toward answering the question that has even prominent Republicans scratching their heads: Why would Bush shatter his uneasy Iran-contra truce with Congress by forcing upon it his in-your-face CIA nomination of Robert M. Gates who had been tied to Iran-contra, and whose confirmation hearings would surely force a new look at the old scandal?

To understand Bush's decision on Gates, we need only recall his decision on another ex-CIA man who loyally served Donald P. Gregg. For the careers of Bush, Gates and Gregg are wound with common threads.

Gregg and Gates are Company men who served loyally but became stained by that snafu, Iran-contra. In the administration of almost any other president of our time, Gregg and Gates would have been honorably but quietly discharged to sanctuaries in private enterprise.

Not so under Bush. These men who took their hits for his honor were rewarded with promotions damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!

Bush's reward for Gregg was the U.S. ambassadorship to South Korea. In 1989, in a honeymoon mood at the outset of the Bush presidency, a supine Senate confirmed Gregg's ambassadorship in the face of evidence that still makes Democrats cringe, knowing they'd baldly abdicated their consent role.

That abdication in brief: Gregg, then Vice President Bush's national security adviser, sent a memo to Bush saying one of Ollie North's key operatives in the illegal operation was coming in to talk to the vice president about the "resupply of the contras." Whoops! that was illegal and Bush has publicly said he never heard anything about it. Gregg blithely explained this must have been a secretarial typo the memo meant to say "resupply of the copters," not "contras." Right.

Senators pretended they believed that one. Otherwise, they'd have to conclude that our new ambassador was just an old liar which, of course, would bring up the question, too tacky to broach during a honeymoon, of whether our new president was one as well.

(There is, in fact, reason for the Senate to take a new look at Gregg. Former Carter national security aide Adm. Gary Sick says sources of questionable reputation have identified Gregg as having accompanied Reagan campaign chairman William Casey to a meeting in Paris with Iranians, in an effort to delay the release of Americans held hostage until after the 1980

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election. Gregg, though a Bush loyalist, was on loan by the CIA to the national security council staff of then-President Carter. Gregg says he was at the beach with his family on that October day and produced a photo as proof _ but weather experts say the picture couldn't have been taken on the day in question, because the weather was too chilly and cloudy. Maybe someday an official body will chase the clouds away on the Gregg affair.)

Perhaps Bush hoped to recapture his honeymoon bliss when he sent the Senate his latest loyalist, Bob Gates. He might have slipped Gates through if it were not for the new evidence revealed by ex-CIA official Alan Fiers, a Gates subordinate, who just pleaded guilty to Iran-contra crimes. Now the Senate can't ignore mounting evidence that suggests while Gates was No. 2 at the CIA, there was lawbreaking going on all around him _ by his subordinates and his superior.

But those mystified by Bush's decision to choose Gates and taunt the Senate into probing anew would do well to remember how Bush was willing to stick with Gregg _ even if he had to stick it to the Senate. That also wasn't smart politics. It was just Company policy.